

If I believe that my health care provider may be practicing while impaired, to whom do I report the occurrence?

Licensing boards regulate health care providers. If you believe that your health care provider has a drinking or drug problem, contact your provider's respective licensing board.

As a handy reference tool, list the telephone numbers for your state's licensing boards below.

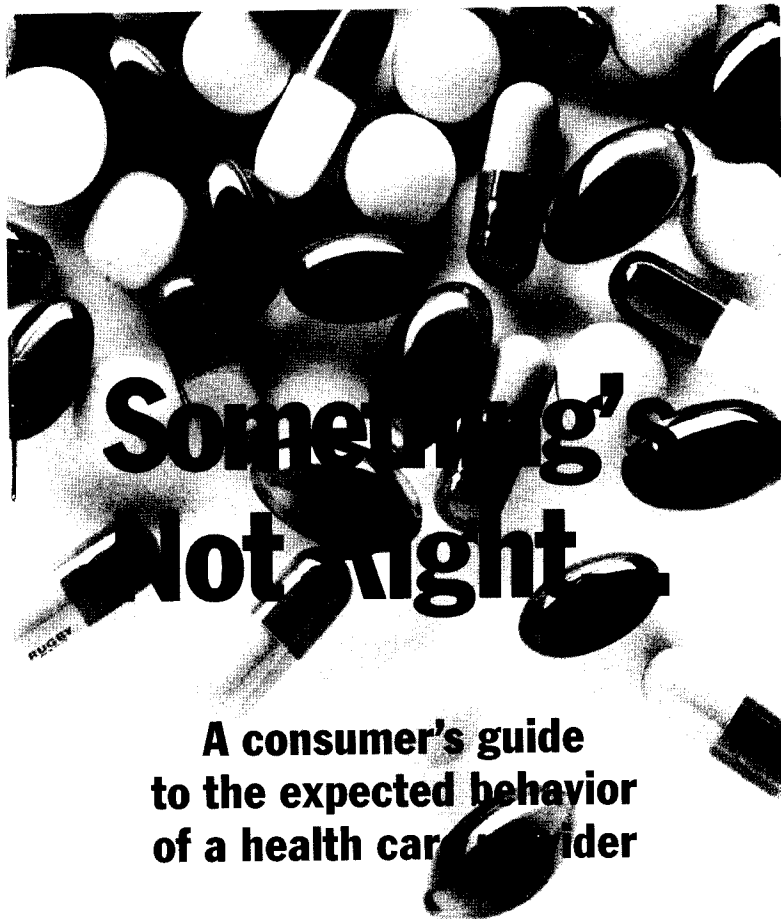
Board of Nursing: _____

Board of Medicine: _____

Board of Pharmacy: _____

Board of Dentistry: _____

Other Licensing Boards: _____



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**NATIONAL
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For more information on this topic, visit the National Council's World Wide Web site at <http://www.ncsbn.org>.

**Chemical Dependency
Resource Module**

Something's Not Right ...

A consumer's guide to the expected behavior of a health care provider

The consumer is the customer of health care services. As the consumer, you select or are assigned the professional who cares for your health needs. You should expect to be treated well by your health care provider and feel confident in the care that you receive.

Who is a health care provider?

Any person who helps care for your health or helps you care for your family's health is a health care provider. This includes doctors, nurses, dentists, social workers and other persons who provide health-related services. Most health care providers are required to have legal authority from their respective state governments to practice. Often, health care providers are licensed by a state agency. This is the means by which the state authorizes (allows)

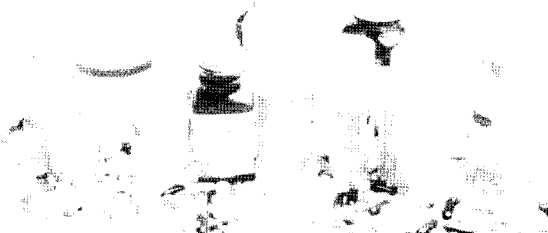
the health care provider to care for you and monitors the health care provider's practice. There are several issues that can directly relate to a health care provider's ability to practice safely and effectively. One of these issues is chemical dependency.

What is chemical dependency?

Chemical dependency is a progressive, chronic disease that is ultimately fatal if not treated. It is an illness that affects more than 16 percent of the population in the United States, or approximately one in six Americans. Addiction is an equal-opportunity destroyer that reaches all walks of life, including those professions which provide health care services. The person who is dependent upon alcohol or other drugs loses the ability to predict its effects and to stop its consumption. The addict has a different physical response to drugs and falls in love with the good feelings that alcohol and other drugs produce. The addict uses compulsively and continues to use in spite of adverse consequences. No one consciously sets out to become dependent. Among health care professionals, drug use often begins when the provider is trying to stay awake through fatigue and long shifts or to self-manage pain. Health care providers are human and, as such, are as susceptible to chemical dependency as any other American.

Doesn't the health care provider know better than to misuse alcohol or drugs?

Health care providers, in addition to exposure to the same temptations as the general population, are exposed to additional factors because of the nature of their professions. Many health care professionals have easy access to drugs. They may see people respond positively to prescribed medications and feel better. The observation that medicines indeed work can contribute to a



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health care provider's excessive faith in the efficacy of medications. Health care providers have significantly more information about drugs, but this can be accompanied by a confidence in their own knowledge to be able to "handle it." It can be a slippery slope, from self-prescribing from the bathroom cabinet, to borrowing medication from patient supplies, to using medication that would be wasted anyway, to diverting medication from patients.

What behavior by my health care provider might indicate a drug problem?

Patients may observe irritability, drowsiness or forgetfulness. Occasionally, a patient might notice the smell of alcohol or strong aftershave or perfume. Patients who only see the health care provider occasionally might observe a change in the provider's appearance, such as a usually neat individual appearing unkempt, or see a change in the provider's physical appearance. However, unless consulting with a provider on a very regular basis, it may be more difficult to notice changes in behavior.

How does chemical dependency affect my health care provider's ability to care for me?

The ability to work effectively may be the last area of a person's life to be affected by chemical dependency; and, in the early stages of the disease, the health care provider may still be able to function safely. But if the disease is allowed to continue, without intervention and treatment, and as the provider becomes more ill,



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patient care can be seriously jeopardized. That is why regulatory boards and other professional organizations are working to educate everyone – health care providers and the public – about the dangers of chemical dependency. Just as a drunk driver places other drivers at risk, a health care provider under the influence of alcohol or drugs places patients at risk.

Chemical dependency is an illness that will affect about one in six Americans in their lifetime.

Can't I rely on other health care professionals to identify whether or not my provider has a problem?

Just as it is difficult to be objective about a loved one or dear friend, it may be extremely difficult for a professional to acknowledge a colleague's chemical dependency. Getting involved requires risk taking and triggers fears. The co-worker may ask, "What if the health care provider denies have a drug problem, can I really prove my allegations? What if he/she loses a job or a professional license? What if I'm wrong?" Simply put, co-workers are sometimes concerned about the possibility of making allegations that might prove to be wrong. This is another reason for education about chemical dependency, so that problems are identified early and so that the patient welfare is always placed first.

What happens if a health care professional is identified as chemically dependent?

Boards are authorized to take disciplinary action if there is sufficient evidence that drug use has affected practice, thus violating grounds for discipline. Discipline cases require careful investigation and boards are required to provide the health care provider due process, including

notice of allegations, a fair and impartial tribunal, and an opportunity to confront witnesses. Discipline actions available to boards range from reprimand to revocation of license in most states, with various intermediate actions such as probation or temporary suspension of license.

As more is learned about the disease of chemical dependency, this knowledge is used to develop improved treatment for the disease. Early identification of the chemically dependent health care provider, with intensive treatment

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and monitoring of the individual's recovery process, promotes effective disease management. Family therapy and work with groups such as Alcoholics

Anonymous (AA) or

Narcotics Anonymous (NA) provide ongoing support and additional learning opportunities for the recovering health care provider. Regaining control of one's life is called recovery.

Many states have developed special programs to promote the early identification and treatment of health care providers. Health care providers who meet specific criteria for entry into these programs are offered an alternative to discipline action. Program participants agree to meet strict requirements regarding maintenance of sobriety and compliance with treatment and program expectations. An important component of these alternative programs is the strict monitoring of the health care provider's practice (including drug testing). Acknowledging the problem early and getting help before the point that the health care provider's work is impaired is safer for patients and better for the

professional. The health care provider in a strong recovery has a lot to offer patients, and the profession does not lose a valuable care resource. Recovery is a true "win-win" situation.

What should I do if I am not comfortable with my health care provider?

Most health care professionals provide caring and effective health care. However, should you observe any inappropriate behavior, notice any unusual odors or feel uncomfortable with your health care provider, do not assume that your discomfort will simply go away by ignoring the situation. Instead, address your concerns by doing any of the following.

- Keep a diary. Write down your observations (who, what, where, when).
- Talk to your family or friends about how you feel.
- Speak to your health care provider.
- Speak to your health care provider's supervisor.
- Contact an ombudsman or patient representative.
- Contact the licensing board.

Learn more about the disease of chemical dependency, so that you can become a better informed health care consumer. Remember that the information which patients provide licensing boards assists boards in the identification of health care providers who may have a chemical dependency problem. Early identification is the key, and you will be helping someone to recovery.

Remember, alcohol or drug use on duty, or behavior of a chemically dependent health care provider who puts patients at risk, does not happen often, but it should *never* happen. Be an informed and alert consumer of health care.